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A bipartisan immigration deal in the Senate that would grant legal status to millions of people living in the country unlawfully is drawing criticism from both sides of the controversial debate.

Some, however, offered cautious praise Friday that at least something could be done to grant a path to citizenship for the nation's estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants.

"It's better than nothing and good for a lot of people. At least they have a chance at being legal residents," said Esteban Montes de Oca, owner of the La Luz Bakery in Round Lake.

Originally from Guerrero, Mexico, he has lived in the United States for the past 24 years. He benefited from the amnesty granted to undocumented immigrants in 1986 when he was working as a cook in a Chicago restaurant.

"This time I feel they want to make it tougher," Montes de Oca said.

Under the Senate proposal, illegal immigrants could obtain a renewable visa that would allow them to stay in the country indefinitely after paying fees and fines totaling \$5,000. Heads of households would be required to return to their home countries before they could obtain one of the new visas. Some immigrants are concerned about how long they would have to stay abroad, away from their U.S.-based families.

"They fear that if they go to their country, they won't be able to fix their papers from there," said Rosa Roman of Round Lake Park. Originally from Veracruz, Mexico, she is studying English as Second Language at Mano a Mano Family Resource Center.

The agreement also calls for changes in the immigration system that would limit the importance

of family ties and put more emphasis on their skills, education levels and job experience. For example, U.S. citizens would no longer be able to petition to bring their brothers and sisters to this country or children over the age of 21 and legal permanent residents would be limited to sponsoring spouses and children under 21.

"The principle of family unification, that has been so important in immigration law in the past, seems eviscerated by this bill," said Andrew Sagartz, an immigration attorney based in Libertyville.

Some other things troubling him about the bill is that temporary workers would not have a path to become permanent residents. They would be granted a two-year visa, and then have to return to their home country for a year before they could receive another two-year visa.

"The good thing is that for the 12 million undocumented immigrants that are here, there would be some way to earn residency," Sagartz said. "And they're making an effort to reduce backlogs."

He warns that with all the talk of possible immigration reforms, unscrupulous "notarios" are scamming immigrants saying for \$1,000 they will be first in line for legal residency.

Conservatives call the bipartisan deal an "amnesty" and complain that it would reward the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants with a way of gaining legal status and staying in the U.S. permanently without being punished.

"I don't like anything about it," said Rick Biseada, a Lindenhurst resident who also leads the Chicago Minuteman Project.

He doubts that illegal immigrants would pay the fines or return to their home countries in order to receive the visas outlined in the new deal. He would like to see current laws better enforced.

"Once you start going after the employers that employ illegal immigrants you'll see how fast they'll scatter," Biseada said. "The point is that nobody has been enforcing the laws."

The new agreement also calls for 400 miles of border fence between the U.S. and Mexico, instead of the 800 miles proposed in earlier legislation, he said.

On Monday the Senate is set to begin debating the bargain reached between key Democratic and Republican senators and the White House. It will face a tougher debate in the House, which passed the controversial bill that made aiding an undocumented immigrant a felony and ignited protests around the nation last year.

Congressman Mark Kirk of Highland Park said he has two key principals regarding immigration.

"Number one is that we control the border and that we build a wall. Number two is that we come up with a fair system to handle children who have lived nearly all of their lives in the United States," Kirk said.

Legislators may avoid the hot button issue of immigration reform this close to elections in 2008.

"It's such a balancing act," said Brian Herman, spokesman for Congresswoman Melissa Bean of Barrington. "You have to very carefully scrutinize the issues, the undocumented workers, security, borders and economy."

He added, "Generally speaking (Bean) has always said she is opposed to amnesty."

While legislators debate the future of the nation's undocumented immigrants, Montes de Oca said his life changed for the better after the amnesty of 1986. It gave him the opportunity to open his own business and raise his children in the United States. He wants other newer immigrants to have the same opportunity.

"I really feel like it's going to happen. Even though it's probably not going to happen the way everyone wants," Montes de Oca said.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.